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BREASTFEEDING DECREASES INFANTS' RISK OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES

August is Breastfeeding Awareness Month in Virginia

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Babies who are not breastfed for their first six months of life are more likely to develop a wide range of infectious diseases including ear infections, diarrhea and respiratory illnesses, according to the Office of Women's Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Also, babies who are not breastfed are sick more often and have more doctors' visits than children who are breastfed.

"Breast milk contains antibodies that protect infants from bacteria and viruses. These antibodies cannot be duplicated exactly in infant formula," said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H.

Breastfeeding may also protect children from chronic diseases later in life. Some studies suggest that infants who are not breastfed have higher rates of asthma, obesity, leukemia and type 1 and 2 diabetes.

Mothers also benefit when they breastfeed their babies. They experience a decreased risk of ovarian and breast cancer and increased weight loss. Breastfeeding mothers also show less postpartum anxiety and depression than do formula-feeding mothers.

Breastfeeding has a financial advantage, too. Mothers who breastfeed can save about \$700 on the cost of standard infant formula during the first year, according to estimates from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This figure can increase significantly if the child requires a special formula.

Breastfeeding in the United States has increased from 24 percent in the 1970s to 70 percent according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2004, the CDC reported that 67.7 percent of Virginia mothers initiated breastfeeding and 36 percent were breastfeeding at six months.

Not all mothers can breastfeed their babies due to health conditions and some choose not to for personal reasons. For these mothers, iron-fortified infant formula is a safe alternative that can provide babies with the necessary nutrition.

For more information on breastfeeding visit the Virginia Department of Health's Web site at www.vahealth.org/breastfeeding or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Web site, www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding.

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